

Back Again, Back Again: Gold, Part Four

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty: Gold, part four.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I stepped down. The dancing began, then, even as many gathered into groups to discuss what was to come, to make their plans of attack. The chandeliers glowed far above with soft candlelight and a very different sort of anxiety began to appear as Cassian stepped in front of me and offered his hand.

This was not Cassian the princeling, nor Cassius Rex, King of Rhysea. He was only so much a king as I was a soldier. He was a nervous boy in a nice suit, and I could hear the true question in his voice as he asked me to dance.

I accepted, and before I could think beyond the thudding of my heart we were whirling across the floor, the Rhysean sort of

waltz we'd practiced the night before clumsily presenting itself before me.

Back side front side, present-out-behind-out-in, back to repeat, circle, circle, try not to step on Cassian's toes, try not to look all the way up at him, but this is a ballroom, what's he going to do, really? Back side front side, present-out-behind-out-in.

Fool, I thought at myself more than once.

I excused myself after the third song and found myself, without much realizing it, beside the dais where the kings sat. The queen saw me and beckoned me up, so I stood beside her.

Do you need something, Eligida? She didn't look at me as she spoke, eyes still cast out over the crowd. I followed her gaze -- Cassian was dancing with another girl, a dignitary's daughter we'd seen around court. I swallowed and did not feel jealous.

I found my magic, I blurted.

Her expression did not shift. The silence dragged on, moment after moment as I waited for a response. *I can do more, now. Like you wanted.*

And then -- she broke, turned to me and smiled. *I'm so glad.*

I started, taken aback by the smile, the sudden warmth coming from this distant queen. I grinned back, waiting for the *but*.

One didn't come.

You spoke well, earlier.

Thank you, king, I replied, bowing my head. This was a lie, but a kind one -- we all knew how shitty my Rhysean was. *I feel it could have gone better, if I had been given more instructional time. Especially at these events, I fear I never know enough.*

What does it matter? She asked flippantly. *There will always be my son to translate. There's no need for it, not when there are more important things to be done.*

What are you afraid of me knowing? I wanted to ask, but bit my tongue. I'd spent my days in court, learning nothing except how to stay still. Whatever important things were being done, I didn't understand them. *I see, king. But I do wonder --*

What do you think of my son? She cut in coolly.

I swallowed. *Your son?* Said like a question. As if there was any question to whom she was referring.

Cassius Rex. What do you think of him?

I think he's -- I hesitated. My brain kept going, even as my tongue faltered. *I think he's -- impossible. To sum up. Even after all of it, even after the fallout and the change -- even*

years later, I find myself short-circuiting trying to encapsulate everything he is. Was. Even months after leaving Rhysea, spending all of my time trying to figure out how to put these strange and beautiful people into words, I don't know how to describe all the little things that I think about when I remember them. Cassian was slowing down to match your pace and crowns and curly hair and the sound of his breathing as I laid on his chest. He was swords embossed with destiny and worries about his place in the world. He was his mother when she told him to be. He was more than that -- and he was less than that -- and he was things we haven't reached yet.

I think he's -- good. I think he tries to be good.

She nodded, slowly. The song ended, and Cassian scanned the room, his eyes meeting mine. He mouthed, dramatically, *a rescue?*

You spend much time with him.

I don't know very many other people, king. But that wasn't all true. I would've picked him out of a room of people to pass an evening with.

She paused. *Are you unhappy?*

No. No, king. No, I was never unhappy in Rhysea, no matter what was going on. Because a world with magic was always better than what I'd left behind. *I just -- it was an observation. My options of communication are limited, as I only know English, and they only know Rhysean.* It was a jab, and we both knew it.

She let it slide. *My son cares for you, Eligida.*

I -- I see.

You should ensure he has not misplaced his affections. She cleared her throat. *I know you do not agree with my choices, Eligida, but I ask you to abide by them. I work towards the same ends as you and my son do.*

Cassian climbed the dais. The dancing continued, my conversation with the queen over and done.

I searched for the girl in lavender, as Cassian took my hand and led me down to the floor. I let my eyes cast out for her as we danced, as the rows shifted and partners changed and I was standing across from the boy who always waited after court for the room to clear.

She was nowhere that I could see. It turned out -- as I discovered, much later on in the journey, that she was visiting Rhia, had snuck up to our room and spent as much time as she could safely manage with her.

The dancing ended, and the girl appeared once more. She approached me, again, but this time Cassian was glued to my arm and the expression she wore made me want to keep him beside me, a measure of protection, a measure of comfort.

I'll be seeing you again, she said in Rhysean, sweeping into a sarcastic sort of bow. *My sovereign.*

Cassian cursed under his breath as she walked away. *Like hells you will. Guards?* He asked. They snapped to attention, as they always did around him, and as he called them by name they nodded. *Don't let her back in again.*

Sic, my sovereign.

Cassian turned to me.

Listen, he said, his face alight with an intensity somewhere between excitement and anger. The girl rattled him, for reasons I couldn't tell you, listener. I don't know them myself. *There's to be another raid in a few days. You should come with us. Show the world all you can do, now.*

I thought we said no more raids, I replied apprehensively, reaching up to where my scar ran along my shoulder. Bile rose in the back of my throat at the thought of another battle. I'd had enough of throwing up for the day. I didn't need more. *That I'd just get killed if I went.*

That was before magic. Now you're safe.

Safe as what? I scoffed.

Safe as anyone, in a war.

Cassian, I don't think --

Ilyaas - his voice was firm. *I promise. You will be okay.*

My stomach churned - that was not a promise anyone could make for a battlefield - but I agreed.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.